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School governance update: October 2020

Updated 8 October 2020

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Welcome to the October edition of the governance update. We know this has been an unusual start to the academic year. Governance has never been more critical, and governors and trustees have continued to provide support and strategic challenge within their schools and trusts. The actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak page is regularly updated with information for schools and academy trusts over this period.

Please also see the changes to the school exclusion process during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak page which is recently updated statutory guidance.

1. New school and trust governance role descriptors

We have published new role descriptors designed to provide high-level information about the roles in maintained school and academy trust governance, and the responsibilities of each role.

The maps and descriptions contained in the documents serve as an introduction to, and clarification of, the various roles in the governance system. The descriptors also include links to further support and guidance that you may find helpful. We would encourage you to read and share these descriptors within your governing board.

In addition, Baroness Berridge has written to all academy trust members highlighting the importance of their role in the governance system and to share the role descriptors.

2. Publication of the governance handbook (2020 edition)

The Governance Handbook is updated for 2020 to reflect policy and legislation changes from the past year, or to clarify language where necessary. For example, it includes information about cyber security in schools and the new requirement for trust boards to have a clerk/governance professional. There is also a new foreword by Baroness Berridge, who took over the role of Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System in February 2020.

There are references to legislative and policy changes impacted by the coronavirus (COVID-19), where this is seen as essential, but otherwise, please continue to use dedicated coronavirus guidance pages on GOV.UK.

3. Governing and trust boards' role and meetings during coronavirus (COVID-19)

It is important that governing and trust boards continue to support and collaborate with executive leaders and ensure that they are still fulfilling their duties regarding the 3 core functions of governance as set out in the Governance Handbook.

Governing and trust boards should continue to take a pragmatic approach to meetings. We would expect the chair to keep the conversation open with board members on how they wish to meet and make arrangements, as necessary. If any board members do decide to meet in person, then they would need to comply with the rule of 6, social distancing, any local health and safety measures and the school and trust's risk assessment.

Arrangements for meetings must facilitate all members' needs so that boards can function effectively and in accordance with their brief (and any other governance) requirements, clerks and governance professionals will be essential in facilitating this.

4. Cyber-security for schools

The Department for Education and the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has been made aware of an increasing number of cyber-attacks involving ransomware infection affecting the education sector.

We recently wrote to school leaders with guidance on ransomware. Following this guidance will help schools cover the basics. You should:

- have an incident plan and test it
- make sure your data is backed up offline and test the recovery of it
- regularly review your defences and controls

We also worked with the NCSC on cyber security questions for governors and trustees to help inform conversations with school leaders.

5. Funded training and development programmes

Our funded development programmes are now available virtually and are suitable for home working.

The governance leadership programmes are ideal for those in roles such as chair, vice chair or committee chair and will support you to work with your board to increase its effectiveness.

The governance clerking programmes are suitable for all school, academy or trust board clerks and aim to increase clerking expertise.

For further details on these programmes go to our guidance on academy and school governance: professional development.

6. National Leaders of Governance (NLG) reform recommendations

In September 2020, we published the recommendations of our external advisory group on NLG reform. The report sets out the findings and recommendations of the NLG reform external advisory group.

7. National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER): report on school and trust governance

NFER have published a research report on school and trust governance, from a survey of those involved in governance from 1,207 individual schools, academies and trusts, and 30 interviews with individuals.

The report provides an independent picture of various elements of school and trust governance, including:

- governance structures and the distribution of responsibility
- size and characteristics of governing bodies
- recruitment and retention
- the experiences of and challenges faced by those involved in governance

Conclusions are drawn about the governance system as a whole, as well as about specific types of governing boards, and the report suggests areas where support and guidance for the sector could be improved.

8. Provide or update contact details

School and trust governance details are set out on the get information about schools (GIAS) website. It is important that these details are kept up to date, including email addresses, so the department can send direct communications when necessary. Academy trusts must notify ESFA about the appointment or vacating of governance roles within their trust. This is a requirement in the Academies Financial Handbook.

Contact your clerk or governance professional to add or update information in the governance section of GIAS using the school/trust's DfE sign-in account.

If you are a clerk, governance professional, or are otherwise unable to upload your details to GIAS, email schoolgovernance.update@education.gov.uk and we will add you to the circulation list for this update manually.

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